

The View

Why We Meditate

We don't meditate to become better people or have special experiences, says CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE. Meditation is simply the way we relate to our already existing enlightened state.

THE ACTUAL EXPERIENCE, techniques, and disciplines of meditation are still unfamiliar to many people. So I would like to give you a basic idea of how meditation practice works, how it operates in our everyday life, and how it functions scientifically, so to speak.

The practice of meditation is not so much based on becoming a better person, or for that matter becoming an enlightened person. It is seeing how we can relate to our already existing enlightened state. To do that is a matter of trust, as well as a matter of openness.

Trust plays an extremely important part in the practice of meditation. The trust we are discussing is trust in yourself. This trust has to be recovered rather than developed. We have all kinds of conceptualizations and attitudes that prevent us from uncovering that basic trust. These are known as the veil of conceptualization.

Sometimes we think of trust as trusting someone else to provide us with security, or trusting someone else as an example or an inspiration. These kinds of trust are generally based on forgetting yourself and trying to secure something trustworthy from the outside. But when our approach is highly externalized, the real meaning of trust is lost.

Real trust is not outward facing, as if you were completely poverty-stricken. When you have that mentality, you feel that you have nothing valuable within you, so you try to copy somebody else's success or style or use somebody else's

Left: Stoneware Luohan, Liao dynasty, 916–1125 C.E., Northern China

resources. However, Buddhism is known as a nontheistic tradition, which means that help doesn't come from outside.

The Sanskrit term for meditation, *dhyana*, is common to many Buddhist traditions. In Chinese it is *chan*, and in Japanese it is *zen*. We may use the word "meditation" in the English language, but how can we actually express its meaning or what this approach actually is?

We have to know what we mean by meditation at all. Sometimes we use the word to mean emptying out or letting go. Sometimes we mean relaxation. However, the point of meditation practice is actually to rediscover our hidden neurosis and our hidden sanity at the same time.

Although meditation involves training and discipline, the point is not to become a good, highly trained person who will behave in a certain enlightened style, so that you will be accepted among the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Rather, the meaning of meditation is intense lightness.

Meditation is intense, because the practice is demanding, and your commitment to the sitting practice of meditation day after day is very demanding. At the same time, the practice of meditation is very light, because you have nothing to do, and nothing to accomplish, when you practice. So intense lightness or intense freedom is the meaning of meditation.

There is another tradition of practice, the contemplative tradition, which involves contemplating certain themes, subjects, or ideas. You may visualize a full moon, a flickering candle, or raindrops, or you may imagine yourself glowing with light. There are visualizations using symbols and signs of all kinds. These all fall in the category of the contemplative tradition, rather than the meditative tradition. According to the Buddha, such practice is often merely mental gymnastics, or a source of entertainment that is furthering your neurosis instead of leading to enlightenment.

So according to the buddhadharma, simplicity is important. Therefore *dhyana*, meditation, means reliance on simplicity. That is the starting point.

Another important aspect of meditation is discipline. Discipline leads to openness, but that does not mean one's frivolity is included as part of the path. Discipline is very severe and extremely demanding, highly demanding. You are expected to take part in this severe discipline, which is the discipline to be, to sit, to practice, and to completely involve your attitude, your conceptualizations, your subconscious mind, your emotions, your domestic affairs, and every aspect of yourself in your practice. Everything in your life situation becomes part of meditation, which is an enormous demand.

Giving in to such demand eventually begins to open a huge gate or door that has been shut tight. From this point of view,

developing openness is not so easy—at all. It is opening a heavy wooden door, which is stuck. Opening this huge door is enormously demanding. It is not an artificial door, but a real, heavy door. To open it, first you touch the door handle, then you have to pull and pull and pull. Not succeeding, you have to pull further. Then, finally, you begin to hear the sound of the wood creaking, which is the first sign that you are finally going to be able to open this door. The creaks are encouragement that something is actually happening. Slowly, slowly, it opens a little, and then more, until finally you can open the whole door. Whew!

This is how discipline equals openness—it is very deliberate, extremely deliberate. Nothing comes free, and nothing comes easy, either.

Meditation is also about exerting yourself and using your inquisitive mind as part of the practice. In order to be a good student, you have to be highly inquisitive. Then information is no longer a foreign element; it becomes part of furthering your inquisitiveness.

That inquisitiveness is referred to in traditional terms as faith or devotion. Why so? You are inquisitive because you want to find out something. There is something that interests or itches you. It sucks you in, and you want to find out more and more. That attraction is the basis for faith, or devotion. You feel that there's got to be something behind the whole thing, so you explore more, and more, and more. You never tire of your experience, but you are highly inquisitive about it. Each time you discover something, you feel even more inquisitive. That faith or devotion to things is very contagious.

Another aspect of meditation is that it reveals further neurosis. Here, we are speaking of the neurosis that you've been trying to hide underneath your carpet, your pillows, your seat, underneath your desk. You don't want to look into it, so you try to slip it underneath something somewhere. You try not to think about it at all.

We have to come face-to-face with these neuroses that we've been concealing from ourselves. We usually say, "Oops, that's not very nice, but never mind. Something else will come up that feels much better. I'll take advantage of that, rather than looking at this other thing, which is so unpleasant. Let's just forget about it." We've been doing that for a long time. In fact, we've become so professional at this approach that we really don't question ourselves.

So meditation is uncovering those tricks that we've developed. In the beginning, a person who is practicing meditation usually feels extremely clumsy and embarrassed. You may even question whether you're doing something worthwhile. Meditation may seem unnecessary. You may feel that you're wasting your time, money, and effort.

Meditation is about relating with two factors. It relates you with yourself, and it also relates you with your world. Through the practice of meditation, you are able to synchronize your world and yourself. Working with the two eventually produces a spark. It is like rubbing two sticks together or striking a flint against a stone to produce a spark. The spark of light you produce is called *karuna*, or compassion.

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE (1939–1987) was the author of such classics as *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* and *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior*. He was the founder of this magazine.

When you first come to meditation, you may not like yourself very much. You may feel that you even hate yourself, or hate your world. But you continue to practice and relate with your world and yourself simultaneously, both in meditation and in everyday life situations. Doing so properly, thoroughly, and completely, some kind of warmth begins to develop. You find that the phenomenal world is workable after all. It may not be lovable yet, but at least it's workable, manageable. And you realize that maybe you too are workable and manageable.

So the practice of meditation is composed of these three elements: working with yourself, working with the phenomenal world, and working with the warmth that develops. You begin to take a liking to your frustration, pain, and boredom. Everything is part of your world.

The practice of meditation is the only way to develop this basic trust in yourself and your world. Beyond that, meditation is the key to developing openness and the potential of enlightenment. Without this practice as the basis, you may be sidetracked by all kinds of entertaining processes. Those sidetracks may feel quite good for a few months. You can do all kinds of exotic, seemingly fantastic things. Still, when you are going through these experiences, your vessel has a hole in it, somewhere or other. Somewhere, you are still leaking. You are not able to hold things within yourself properly. Your fascination, your sense of impatience, and trying to make the best of things in the world by entertaining yourself is the heart of what I call spiritual materialism.

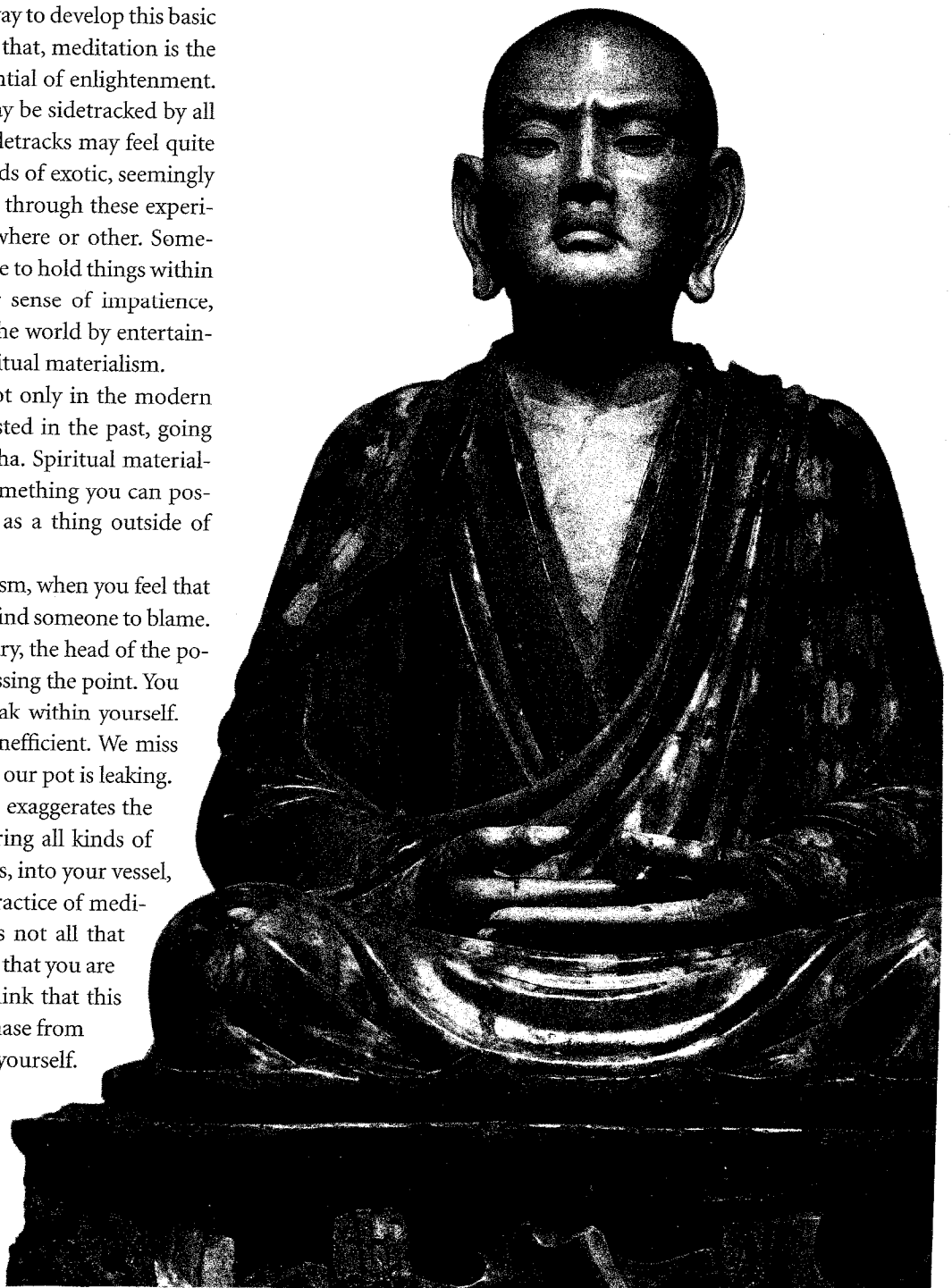
That approach is always a problem, not only in the modern world but also throughout history. It existed in the past, going back 2,600 years to the time of the Buddha. Spiritual materialism, the desire to turn spirituality into something you can possess and the tendency to see spirituality as a thing outside of yourself, is always there to be dealt with.

With the mentality of spiritual materialism, when you feel that everything in your life is a mess, you try to find someone to blame. We might blame the president of the country, the head of the police force, or our own boss. But you are missing the point. You ignore the leak in your own vessel, the leak within yourself. Nobody regards his or her own vessel as inefficient. We miss the point: that actually *our* vessel is leaking; our pot is leaking.

Meditation, especially at the beginning, exaggerates the leaks that are taking place. You keep pouring all kinds of goodies, all kinds of interesting experiences, into your vessel, but it never fills up. Finally, through the practice of meditation, you realize that there is a leak. It's not all that magical. The leakage is distrust. You realize that you are rejecting your basic sanity, and that we think that this basic sanity is something you have to purchase from somebody else and then transplant it into yourself.

The real weakness is thinking that you are not good enough, and that there is some outside security that you have to find. That you have to become like someone else. That somebody else has the sanity and you are messed up. You think that you have to become like someone else, rather than becoming yourself. When you realize that this is what you have been doing, then your life becomes real and workable—because it has been workable all along.

In summary, meditation is a means of working with oneself and the phenomenal world. Working with those two together produces sparks of warmth and trust. A sense of workability begins to develop throughout your life. ♦



Luohan (detail), Chinese, from Yixian, Hebei Province, 11th–13th century, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.